

OPEN

See Her Walking Through Open Doors

The Historic Journey of LCMS Women

Part I

By *Marlys Taeye Moberg*

When Jesus opened new doors for women during His ministry on earth, the women of that time did not hesitate to walk through them. Mary of Bethany sat at His feet to learn. Martha affirmed, “You are the Savior.” Mary Magdalene joyously announced the Good News of the risen Christ. Several women traveled with Christ and His disciples and assisted them financially.

So it has been also in our day. As mission doors have opened for women to “Serve the Lord with Gladness,” LCMS women have faithfully entered the contemporary mission fields of service, education, and sharing the Good News.

The First Doors Open for Women in Mission Service

Like Dorcas “who was always doing good and helping the poor,” LCMS women began working together to meet human needs soon after the Synod was established. The first two societies were started in 1852 by the wives of the Fort Wayne and St. Louis Seminary presidents to sew, mend, wash, and iron for students. They joked that when the mending was done, some items looked like Joseph’s coat of many colors!

The scope of their activities broadened as new challenges presented themselves.

After Rev. and Mrs. Johann F. Buenger accepted several orphans into their St. Louis home, women played a major role in establishing the first LCMS orphanage

in 1868. An auxiliary was organized to support the orphanage, then another to assist the city missionary, and a third to help the Lutheran Hospital. Soon auxiliaries were forming all over the country!

A decade after the LCMS sent its first foreign missionary to India in 1895, Fort Wayne women founded the India Mission Ladies’ Society to sew for the mission. A second chapter — launched in St. Louis in 1907 — added China when that mission field opened in 1913, and the name was changed to The Foreign Mission Ladies’ Aid Society.

Following World War I, many changes occurred. The nation adopted woman suffrage. The German language was de-emphasized in the LCMS, and many men began to see the potential benefits of educating women as “assistants in our heathen missions.” After World War I, St.



Johanna S. Buenger CHI

Louis women who had volunteered on the Council of Defense had some money left in their treasury. They designated \$500 as seed money for a Lutheran Convalescent Home fund, and when it reached \$3,236 by the next year, they purchased a home. Its indebtedness of \$15,000 was liquidated in less than four years. From the beginning, the administration of the home was entirely in the hands of women.

The LWML: An Open Door for All LCMS Women in Mission

After LCMS women's societies in Oklahoma established a district-wide organization in 1928, other districts followed quickly, and the Lutheran Laymen's League suggested a national women's auxiliary. Women who studied the idea opted for a separate organization, and the Synod gave its approval in 1941. Pastors who encouraged the endeavor emphasized the importance of a program of Christian knowledge and Christian service — meetings that were more than a *Kaffee Klatsch* and did not rely on pastors "to make the program interesting."

At the organizational meeting in 1942, delegates chose the name "Lutheran Women's Missionary League" (LWML) not just to indicate its goal of supporting missions but to emphasize that *every* member was to be a missionary.

Clara Schmitt, the first LWML president, was an amazing woman and one of few females to graduate from the only high school in St. Louis in 1895. A businesswoman, she inherited her father's share of a wallpaper and painting business and became a full legal partner with co-owner Otto Schmitt, whom she married in 1900.

At various times, the Schmitt household included her mother, mother-in-law,

and the Schmitt's widowed daughter with her five children — plus animals galore (pet snakes, pigeons, a mockingbird, canaries, Great Danes, horses, an opossum, and a wolf)! Accord-



Clara Schmitt CHI

ing to her grandson, Rev. Kenneth Young, she was "a good speaker...a unique combination of kindness, tact and determination...a woman with a lot of 'get up and go'...a real organizer!" When a short in a home hair dryer set her hair on fire, she donned a wig after her skin healed and, undaunted, kept on with all her activities.

As LWML president, she traveled and spoke extensively, mailed all the mite boxes and subscriptions of the *Lutheran Woman's Quarterly* magazine and, until the LWML rented an office, she even stored the extra copies of back issues of the *Quarterly* in her house.

Women Leaders Walk Through the Board Room Door

Welcoming the services of women in other capacities, the Synod adopted woman suffrage in 1969, and subsequently added women to LCMS Boards and Commissions. Jean Garton was the first woman appointed to a Synod Board (Public Relations, 1969–1980). She also chaired the LCMS Task Force on Women (1974–81), the LCMS Commission on Women (1984–91) and in 2007, became the second woman elected to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The first, Dr. Shirley Bergman, was elected in 2004.

Florence Montz, LWML president (1971–75), was the first woman elected

to the LCMS Board of Directors (1983). She also served on the Council for Christian Medical Work (1976–97) and as its executive staff person in the LCMS national office (1979–83).

Dorothy Rosin (LWML secretary, 1961–65) was the first woman elected to the LCMS Mission Board in 1973, where she served 13 years and represented the Board on a mission trip to India in 1974. Now every current LWML president is invited to take a seat on the Mission Board.

Doors of Higher Learning Open Wide to Women



Donna Streufert

Just as Mary chose to learn at Christ's feet, LCMS women have also studied God's Word earnestly and in depth — an effort that was greatly advanced with the advent of LWML Bible studies. Initially pastors led the convention Bible studies, but at the Mobile convention (1973) that responsibility was shared by three women. Pastors also served as Bible study editors for the *Lutheran Woman's Quarterly* magazine until 1991 when Donna Streufert was named to that position. And, just as Eunice and Lois taught Timothy, preparing him for a life of service to God, so also LCMS women have taught children about Jesus in the most universal mission fields — homes and classrooms.

As the Saxon founders of the Missouri Synod were sailing to America in 1839, they were already planning parochial schools. Although there had been no women teachers in Germany, it was only

a few years after they set foot on this continent that women were asked to teach. To make sure they were well prepared, Trinity Lutheran Church, Springfield, Illinois, proposed a ladies' seminary (as schools of higher education were often called) in 1873, but it never materialized. Not until 1919 did five women first enter the teacher-training program at Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebraska. Today women teachers outnumber male instructors in LCMS parochial schools and also hold positions on LCMS college/university faculties.

All schools, including the seminaries, have women students. At the seminaries, they earn various Master of Arts degrees, first offered in 1956. In 1961, Dorothy Hoyer became the first woman to earn a Master of Arts in Religion degree from the St. Louis Seminary. In 2001 Jennifer (J.J.) Leese became the first woman to receive



Jennifer (J.J.) Leese *CHI*



Lois Voeltz

a Master of Sacred Theology degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. She now teaches religion at Hong Kong International School. The very first woman to teach religion full time in a Lutheran high school was Lois Voeltz (Valley Lutheran High School, Phoenix, Arizona, 1983–1996).

The year 1919 marked yet another opportunity for women when the Association of Lutheran Charities approved the establishment of the first deaconess program in Fort Wayne. In 1924, the first graduate was Martha Ebert, who was called to New York to care for the health of German emigrants. From 1957–1976 (and as a volunteer until her death in 1991), her international ministry grew to include immigrants from Africa, China, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and Puerto Rico.

Today the deaconess program is based at Concordia University Chicago and the two seminaries. Deaconess education at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, began in 2002 with 10 students, and a similar program was started at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, in 2003. Men preparing for the ministry earn a Master of Divinity (M. Div.) degree; the course of study for women, similar to the M. Div. curriculum, leads to a Master's Degree in Deaconess Studies.



Rosa J. Young

The first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from an LCMS Seminary (1961) was Rosa J. Young, a black educator. Through her efforts, the LCMS began

mission work among African Americans living in the South.

The daughter of a Methodist circuit rider, Rosa was concerned about the

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large number of black children who were receiving no education because they were not accepted in public schools. Her solution: open a private school in Rosebud, Alabama. As it grew in three terms from seven students to 215, she could no longer finance it and sought help everywhere to no avail. She “went home and prayed and prayed and prayed” and then wrote to Booker T. Washington. He suggested contacting the Lutheran Synodical Conference.

As a result, the LCMS sent pastors to Alabama, and Rosa became an LCMS member. Through her continuing efforts, the LCMS established 20 congregations and 30 rural schools in that region.

With Lutheran help in 1922, she also founded Alabama Lutheran Academy, now Concordia College at Selma, Alabama, to train black missionaries and teachers. Rosa served on its faculty. In appreciation for her unflagging efforts, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1961 from Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

Rosa worked tirelessly most of her 96 years, and even mortgaged her own property to keep the work alive. She died in 1970. A museum portraying her life is located at Concordia College Selma. Synod's Board for Black Ministry annually gives Rosa Young Awards to “individuals who, in spite of challenging situations, are able to foster and forge an effective outreach school.”

Author Marlys Taege Moberg served on the LCMS Board for Official Periodicals, 1976–81, and the Board for Communication Services, 1981–89.

The Door Continues to Open... Next issue: Part 2 “Risking it all for the Gospel: Following the Footsteps of LCMS Women Missionaries”